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ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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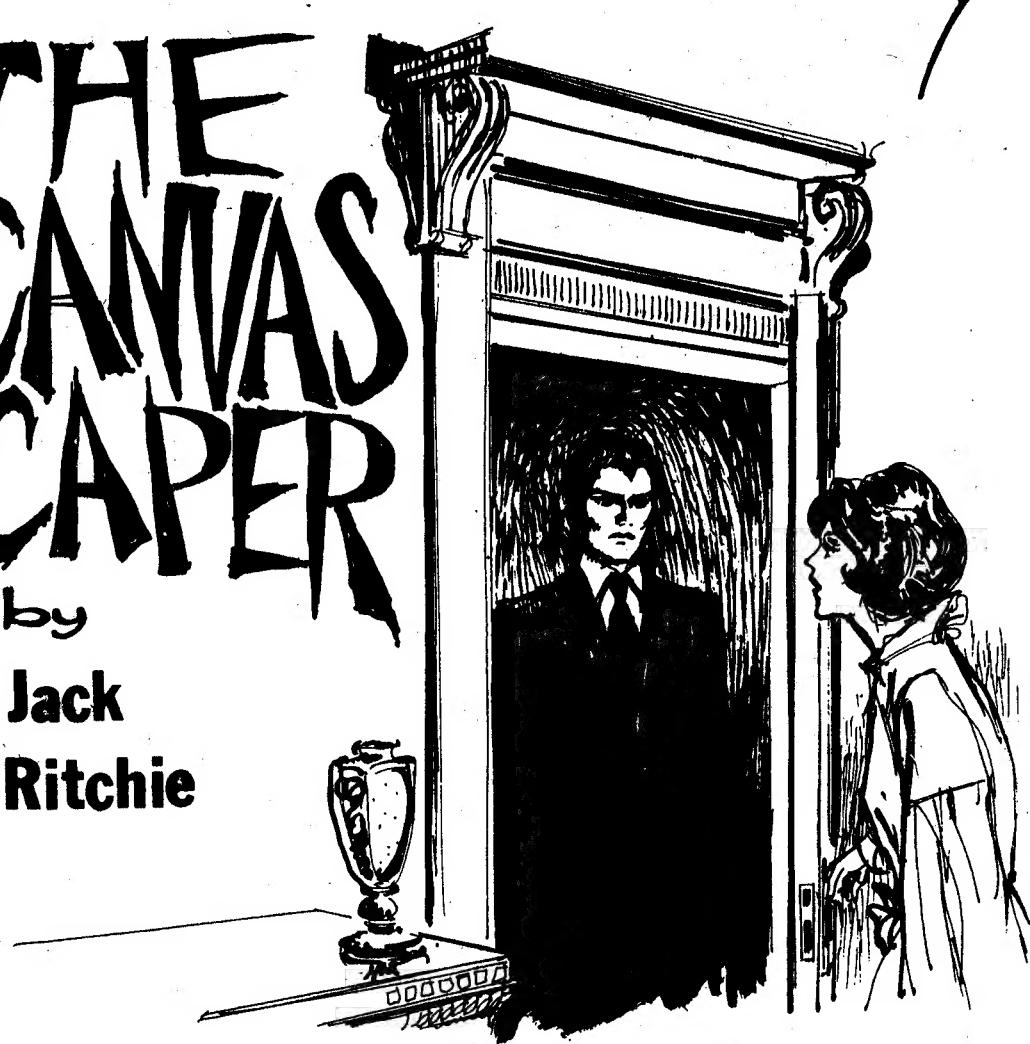
g to her

Here again, our late late detective from the Cardula Agency . . .

THE CANVAS CAPER

by

**Jack
Ritchie**



“Mr. Cardula,” he said, “how do you feel about blackmailers?”

“They are dastardly people, sir.”

He gazed out of the window at the scattered lights in the office building across the street. “Frankly, they should be dead, don’t you think?”

“Possibly, sir.”

He turned back to me. “I drew the low card.”

My prospective client was a tall man dressed with impeccable elegance. There was also the faint aura of liquor about him.

He continued. "We cut cards and I got the three of clubs. So that left the job up to me. It was all to be simple and direct. I would go to his home and shoot him. And if, for some fantastic reason, the police should question me, the others would swear that I had never left the table all evening."

"The table?"

"The card table. They would claim that I had never left the room all evening."

"They?"

"My associates in this matter." He sighed. "I went so far as to knock at his door, but then I turned and ran before he opened it."

He looked out of the window again. "What would you say if I offered you ten thousand dollars to kill someone? Or to find someone who would? I suppose you'd go to the police?"

I smiled faintly. "If I did, I could prove nothing. It would be my word against yours that the offer was ever made."

He remained thoughtful for a few moments. "Frankly, I don't know any killers for hire or how to go about finding them. But then it came to me that private detectives generally muck about in the seamier things of life, what with divorce work, wiretapping, and so forth, and if anyone knew of an available killer, they certainly should. Anyway, it appeared to be my only lead to the underworld. So I turned to the yellow pages of the phonebook for help."

"And why did you select me?"

"It seemed to me that any private detective whose office hours are from 8 P.M. to 4 A.M. must be closer to the night world of crime than anybody else."

I contemplated my bridged fingertips. "Perhaps I can help you at that. What would be the exact financial arrangement for this killing?"

He brightened and leaned forward. "I don't have that much money on me right now, but I will see that you get five thousand tomorrow and the other five thousand when the job is done."

I nodded. "And what is your name, sir?"

"Never mind that. It won't be necessary for you to know."

"Well then, the name of the victim. I certainly wouldn't want to kill the wrong man, sir."

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"His name is Raoul Henri O'Brien, 118 Frawley Road." My client sighed. "An artist. Of sorts."

"He is blackmailing you and your associates?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"I don't think it is necessary to your job to know why."

I accepted that. "Undoubtedly you will want to arrange an alibi for the time O'Brien dies. When do you want him killed?"

He thought about it. "How about Friday evening? Anywhere from, say, eight to eleven?"

"It is as good as done, sir. Provided, of course, that I receive the first five thousand dollars tomorrow."

He nodded and rose. "As a private detective, I suppose that you are rather good at following people?"

"Sir, that is my speciality. I am superb at it."

"Fine. But don't try to follow me. You will stand at that window and look out. When I reach the street, I will look back up. If I do not see you still at the window, I will assume that you are attempting to follow me and the whole deal will be off. I will find somebody else to earn the ten thousand dollars."

When he left, I went to the window as directed and looked down at the lighted street four stories below. At this time of night—nearly eleven—the street was almost deserted.

I saw my client leave the building and cross the street. He stopped and looked back up.

I waved.

He acknowledged this with a nod and continued walking. He turned the corner and disappeared.

I opened my window and followed.

I had, of course, not the slightest intention of murdering Raoul O'Brien. However, as I had pointed out to my client, taking the matter to the police would be futile. I had to know more about the conspiracy and its participants before I could act in an effective manner.

I sighted my client again as he slipped into an automobile parked at the curb.

He drove from the central city to the lake-shore road and on to the suburbs. Eventually he turned into a long graveled driveway. I paused at the roadside mailbox long enough to read the name "James

McQuiggle" and then continued after.

My client parked his car behind three other vehicles on an oval before a large Norman-style home. He opened the front door and entered.

I moved on to the side of the building where light streamed from a slightly opened French window. Inside I saw three men seated at a card table.

One of them looked a bit familiar. Ah, yes. The short, round man in his middle fifties would be Florian Appleby of the Appleby Galleries. I had sold him the last two paintings I had managed to bring over to America.

I sighed. When I fled the old country, I had managed to take but a few things with me—some gold, a few pieces of jewelry, and half a dozen paintings—whatever could be fitted, somewhat uncomfortably, in an eight-by-three-foot box.

But, alas, all of my possessions were now gone and I was forced to work for a livelihood.

All three of the men at the card table looked up eagerly as my client entered the room.

"Well, James," Appleby said, "is Raoul dead?"

My client—apparently James McQuiggle—went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. "Raoul is still alive. I couldn't bring myself to kill him."

Appleby registered his disappointment. "You reneged, James. I can't stand a man who reneges."

McQuiggle shrugged. "I have come up with a much more satisfactory solution to our problem. I managed to hire a professional killer who will do the job for us."

Appleby regarded him with some awe. "How in the world did you know where to contact a professional killer?"

McQuiggle smiled mysteriously. "I have my ways. He is asking for ten thousand dollars to do the job. We must each ante up one-fourth."

He sipped his drink. "He is going to kill Raoul sometime between eight and eleven this coming Friday evening, so we will all gather here again during those hours."

When Appleby and the two others left, I journeyed to 118 Frawley Road, approximately a half mile farther on.

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wooded acreage. I glided silently to the only lighted windows. A strikingly handsome woman, perhaps in her early thirties, sat watching the late movie on a television screen.

I heard a car coming up the driveway and moved back to the front of the house.

A Karmann-Ghia pulled to a stop and a trimly bearded young man stepped out. He used a key to unlock the front door.

I hied back to the window in time to see him enter the room. The woman barely looked up for a moment and then resumed her television viewing. As for the man—Raoul Henri O'Brien?—he continued through the room and up a stairway.

Light appeared from two windows upstairs and I watched O'Brien change to pajamas, yawn, and lie down on a bed where he promptly fell asleep.

I returned to the woman downstairs and became engrossed in the motion picture she was watching—something about a creature from a dark lagoon.

At the conclusion of the movie, she turned off the set and went upstairs to another bedroom.

I left her to her privacy and flitted about the outside of the building, peering into dark windows here and there (my eyesight remains rather keen even under the darkest of circumstances). At the rear of the house I found what had very likely once been a solarium was now converted into an artist's studio.

My exploration done, I returned to my office, closed the window, and consulted the yellow pages of my phonebook until I found that there existed a James McQuiggle Art Gallery.

So both McQuiggle and Appleby dealt in paintings and their intended victim was an artist. Of sorts, McQuiggle had qualified. Then was it a fair assumption that the other two gentlemen I'd seen in McQuiggle's home were also connected with the world of art in one capacity or another?

Raoul Henri O'Brien. Was he an artist? Frankly, I had never heard of him before.

The next evening at 8 P.M. when I reached my office, I found a small package had been thrust through the mail slot in the door.

I opened it and found five thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills.

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Should I go to the police now? Or would it be wiser to learn more about the entire matter before I made such a move? Perhaps if I asked O'Brien a few judicious questions, I could learn why McQuiggley and associates wanted him killed.

I returned to 118 Frawley Road and pressed the doorbell.

The woman who had watched the TV screen the previous evening answered the door. "Yes?"

"Could I speak to Mr. O'Brien, please?"

She had speculative grey eyes. "I'm sorry, but he's not here. He left about an hour ago."

"Could you tell me when he will return?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Would you by any chance know where he has gone?"

"He didn't tell me and I didn't ask." She looked past my shoulder. "Where's your car?"

I cleared my throat. "I parked it down the road a bit."

There seemed to be nothing more to do but say goodbye and I did. I walked down the driveway and glanced back. She still watched me from the doorway, so I continued until I was well out of sight.

What should I do now? On the assumption that O'Brien might return early, should I linger about the premises and wait? I decided that it was worth a try and made my way stealthily back to the house and the lighted windows.

The room was empty of human life, but only for a few minutes. Then the woman entered carrying a sandwich on a small plate and a glass of milk. She turned on the TV set and sat down.

We settled down to watch what the screen had to offer, which, until ten o'clock, consisted primarily of squealing tires and endless automobile chases.

After the ten o'clock news, she switched channels to the late movie, *Werewolf in the Tower of London*—really quite engrossing.

At its conclusion, she turned off the set and retired to her bedroom.

It was now nearly one o'clock in the morning. Should I continue my vigil? The dark sky threatened rain and I detest getting wet. I decided to make a run, so to speak, for my office and I arrived there just as the first heavy drops began to fall.

The next evening—a Thursday—I rose as usual just after sunset. I

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showered, dressed, and settled down to read the newspaper before setting off for my office.

An item on an inside page instantly caught my attention.

A Raoul Henri O'Brien, 118 Frawley Road, had been killed by a hit-and-run driver at eleven-thirty the previous night as he left a supper club. According to witnesses, O'Brien had been crossing the street when an automobile had come speeding out of the darkness and struck him. The impact tossed him more than sixty feet, and he was killed instantly. The witnesses were unable to recall the automobile's license number, but the vehicle was described as being a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental.

I frowned. Had McQuiggley or one of his associates decided to take the bit into his own teeth and dispose of O'Brien? Or was this a legitimate hit-and-run accident?

When I reached my office, I found another brown package on the floor inside. It too contained five thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills.

Clearly all of this needed further investigation. I went to McQuiggley's home and pressed the buzzer at the door.

McQuiggley himself answered. He showed alarm when he saw me. "Good heavens, there was no need for you to come here. I dropped off the second five thousand at your office this afternoon."

"I know. However, I have a few questions to ask."

The murmur of voices from within indicated that McQuiggley had guests. He quickly pulled me into a side room. "Our agreement was that O'Brien was to be killed on Friday, not Wednesday. It was just luck that yesterday was Charlie's wedding anniversary and we were all at the party. Otherwise I doubt if any one of us would have an alibi."

Charlie? I remembered that when I'd gone to the yellow pages I had also seen a Charles Hanson Galleries listed. "Have the police questioned you?"

"No. I really don't expect them to. I just like to be prepared." He smiled. "Frankly, I thought you'd use a gun or a knife or a blunt instrument, but I suppose hit-and-run was more intelligent." Another thought came to him. "How did you know where to find me?"

I flicked a professional smile. "McQuiggley, I know all about your group—you, Appleby, Hanson, and—" I took a guess "—the one with the beard. His name is at the tip of my tongue."

McQuiggley supplied it. "Brinkmann."

Ah, yes. Hadn't I also seen a Brinkmann Galleries in the yellow pages? I seated myself. "Mr. McQuiggley, I did not kill your Raoul O'Brien."

He blinked. "You didn't? But if you didn't, who did?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Why was O'Brien trying to blackmail you?"

"That is none of your business."

"I am tempted to go to the police and tell them what has transpired between us."

"I would deny everything."

"Really, sir? Then how would you explain to the police the fact that your fingerprints are on the ten thousand dollars I have in my safe?"

Actually, I had no knowledge as to whether McQuiggley had or had not left his fingerprints on the money.

He rubbed his chin reflectively. "Couldn't you just keep the money and forget about the whole thing?"

I shrugged. "Perhaps if I learn the truth, I might not find it necessary to go to the police."

McQuiggley sighed and then capitulated. "Very well. We first met O'Brien two years ago when he arrived here from the West Coast and represented himself as a connoisseur and collector of modern paintings. He attended all the exhibitions and parties and even bought a painting here and there. He certainly had an engaging personality and he simply wormed himself into the art world here."

"Periodically he would dash off to Europe for two or three weeks and when he returned it was always with original paintings which he claimed he had purchased from private galleries or discovered in out-of-the-way pawnshops and attics. He would add them to his own collection and at various times showed them to each one of us."

"Naturally the estimated value of his paintings came into our conversations and he very cleverly left the impression that while he was quite sharp about the value of his Cezannes, he was more than a bit hazy concerning his van Goghs, Gauguins, Modiglianis, and so forth."

McQuiggley wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "And so it appeared that here was a golden opportunity for us to pick up paintings at bargain prices and turn a penny or two."

"And what with one thing and another, each of us bought canvases

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which he reluctantly, *very* reluctantly, let go. For friendship's sake, so to speak. In all, over a period of two years, I bought fourteen paintings from him, and my associates perhaps a similar number each."

"And, in turn, you sold them to someone else?"

He brightened slightly. "At a modest profit, of course."

"But then something went wrong?"

"Yes. A week ago O'Brien told us that the paintings we had purchased were forgeries—every last one of them. And the reason he knew that they were forgeries was simply because he had painted them himself."

McQuiggley shook his head sadly. "I grudgingly admit that, as a forger, he was a genius. He took us all in completely. Fooled the eye and what modest tests we made. He had a good thing going, but unfortunately he was also greedy. He wanted more money than what the canvases brought him and he threatened to reveal the forgeries unless we agreed to pay him an additional one hundred thousand dollars each."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

He seemed pained that I should ask such a question.

"The exposure would have absolutely ruined us. Our reputations, our business. Not to mention people clamoring for their money back and threatening to sue."

"But still you decided that you were not going to pay O'Brien for his silence?"

McQuiggley nodded. "There was the possibility that he would come back to us again and again with demands for more money, and it also remained that O'Brien *alive* could blow the whistle on us at any time, if only in a careless moment."

I pondered. "All of you—Appleby, Hanson, Brinkmann, and you—have alibis for the time O'Brien was killed?"

"We were on Charlie's yacht. We took a moonlight cruise that began at eight P.M. and lasted until well past three A.M. It would have been impossible for any of us to have gotten off the ship to kill O'Brien, if that's what you are thinking."

"Was O'Brien married?"

"He never said he was."

"Then who is the woman living in his house?"

"That would be Louise Peterson. She's his secretary, or something of

the sort. Mostly something of the sort, I would imagine."

I left McQuiggley and went on to 118 Frawley Road, where I pressed the doorbell.

Louise Peterson answered the door.

"My name is Cardula," I said. "Private investigator." I handed her one of my cards.

She examined it. "What is there to investigate?"

"The death of Raoul O'Brien."

She regarded me calmly. "Are you working for an insurance company?"

I smiled noncommittally. "Was Raoul O'Brien's life heavily insured? And who is the beneficiary?"

"As far as I know he didn't carry any insurance. Besides, who would he leave the money to? He didn't have any what you might call friends—or relatives."

"Possibly *you* might be his beneficiary?"

She laughed shortly. "Ha!"

"Madam," I said, "I have reason to believe that Raoul O'Brien was murdered."

She allowed me to enter the house.

"You were Raoul O'Brien's secretary?"

"You might say that."

"Then possibly you were aware of O'Brien's activities?"

"What activities?"

I thought I might as well come out into the open. "Blackmail, Madam. Blackmail."

She eyed me skeptically. "Blackmail? Who the hell would he blackmail and why?"

"Art dealers, Madam. Your employer sold a number of paintings to art dealers in this city and every last one of them is a forgery."

She folded her arms. "Really?"

"But was he satisfied with that?" I asked rhetorically. "No, he was not. After he sold the forgeries, he again approached the dealers and threatened to expose the entire racket if they did not each give him an additional one hundred thousand dollars."

She blinked. "The bastard."

"Greed is the undoing of many an enterprise," I said. "Raoul

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O'Brien was not content with just painting the canvases and selling them, he had to stoop to blackmail."

She stared at the ceiling. "The canvases were forgeries and O'Brien painted them?"

"He confessed the deception to the dealers when he approached them for the blackmail." I allowed a drop of acid to creep into my voice. "But surely, Madam, working for the man and residing in his house as you do, you could not have failed to notice that there was a bit of hanky-panky?"

She seemed to be thinking. "You don't suppose that one of those art dealers got into his car and ran down the dirty dog?"

"No, Madam. Every one of them has an ironclad alibi for the time of O'Brien's death."

She shrugged. "Or possibly you think that *I* might have killed the creep?"

"Madam," I said. "You have referred to the deceased as a bastard, a dirty dog, and a creep. I sense that you might have a motive for killing him. However, I know that you did not."

"How could you know that?"

I knew, of course, because at the time of O'Brien's death she and I had been watching *Werewolf in the Tower of London*, she in comfort and I chilled to the bone. But I said, "Suffice it to say that I have an instinct about such matters."

She regarded me with interest. "If one of the wheeler-dealers didn't kill him and I didn't, whom does that leave? Could it have been a plain old-fashioned hit-and-run accident?"

"At the moment it appears so."

She smiled slightly. "So you're a private detective? How does it pay?"

I shrugged. "It's a living."

"You've got a certain style," she said. "Yes, I like you."

I would have blushed except that I did not want to strain myself.

Her eyes steadied into mine. "Cardula, how would you like to take O'Brien's place?"

"Madam," I said, somewhat shocked at the directness, "what are you proposing? O'Brien is not yet in the ground and already you are casting eyes. Perhaps if we waited a decent month or two—"

She went on. "Raoul was just my front. My salesman. Nothing more.

You need a man to do the talking when you're negotiating with dealers. I painted those canvases."

My mouth dropped. "You! You painted those forgeries?"

She nodded. "Though technically they are not forgeries. They are originals done in the style of anybody you'd care to name. I have a knack for that sort of thing. If I can find space on my studio floor for a canvas, I'll whip you up a Jackson Pollock that will blow your mind."

"You mean that you—a *woman*—"

"Why not? Is there a law against it? What is so ridiculous about a woman being an unscrupulous forger? I did the painting and O'Brien did the selling. But the blackmailing was his own idea. I didn't know a thing about it and may he fry in hell."

She came closer. "We'd make a great team. Of course we'd have to move to some other town. The racket is shot here. How does Miami strike you?"

"My dear Louise," I said. "I am a man of rigid moral fiber. I would not for a moment consider—"

"It's perfectly safe. Even when you're found out, nobody ever takes it to the police. It's hush-hush all around because everybody's got a finger in the pie."

"That is not the question—"

"It's profitable. Very profitable. Did you know that two weeks ago I sold a Matisse to Langley for nearly—"

I held up a hand. "Langley? Who's Langley?"

"He's that art dealer on Jefferson Avenue."

I closed my eyes. But of course. Here I had assumed that McQuiggley, Appleby, Hanson, and Brinkmann represented all of the art dealers O'Brien had tried to blackmail. Why couldn't there have been more who were not necessarily privy to McQuiggley's group?

"How many dealers did you sell your paintings to?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "Five. McQuiggley, Appleby, Hanson, Brinkmann, and Langley."

I smiled. "Would you by any chance happen to know if Langley drives a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental?"

"Why, yes. He once drove O'Brien and me to an exhibition." She stopped, her eyes widening a bit. "Oh. The newspaper said O'Brien was run down by a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental, didn't it?"

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"Exactly," I said. "Langley is our murderer." I went to the phone.

"Hold it," Louise said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm phoning the police. I'll wager that in Langley's garage they will find a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental with a badly damaged fender or hood or both. And by comparing the paint chips undoubtedly found on O'Brien's clothes with the paint of the Lincoln Continental, they will unquestionably find that they match."

"So they match," Louise said. "But I still don't think you've got enough evidence to sustain a murder charge. If he admits to anything at all, it will be simply hit-and-run. And if he is convicted of that, what do you think will happen to him? He is an upstanding member of the community with some degree of money and an unblemished past. At the worst he will be given a year's probation and his driver's license will be suspended for thirty days."

I brooded on that darkly. Here I uncover a murder most foul and the murderer faces nothing more than the possibility of having his driver's license suspended for thirty days. Was it worth the trouble?

I sighed and put down the phone.

"Now now," Louise said, "don't take it so hard. You can't expect justice to triumph all the time." She led me to the couch. "Sit down and we'll talk some more about my proposition."

I am utterly incorruptible and I knew that I could not be swayed. However—in the interest of open-mindedness—I thought I ought to give her the opportunity to exercise her logic, her persuasion, or any possible wiles she could think of to tempt me to join her in her nefarious activities.

The late movie featured *The Beast with Four Fingers*, which we watched now and then.

